



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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LEADER OF VIOLENT HOSTAGE TAKING GETS LIFE SENTENCE

PHOENIX – Jesus Medina-Nevarez, aka Pablo Medina-Nevarez, 25, of Mazatlan, Sinaloa, Mexico, was sentenced Tuesday to life in prison plus seven years by U.S. District Judge Roger G. Strand. Medina-Nevarez was found guilty by a federal jury on October 19, 2006, of Conspiracy to Take Hostages, Hostage Taking, Conspiracy to Harbor Illegal Aliens, Harboring Illegal Aliens, and Possessing and Using a Firearm during and in relation to a crime of violence.

U.S. Attorney for the District of Arizona Paul K. Charlton stated: “The court’s sentence accurately encompasses the scope and violence that characterizes human smuggling in our state. ICE, the Pinal County Sheriff’s Office, the Phoenix Police Department and Peoria Police Department are all to be congratulated for their success in dismantling this large organized crime syndicate.”

The evidence at trial showed that this defendant, along with at least seven others, were part of a violent group of alien smugglers known as the Franco Alien Smuggling Organization. In January 2003, this group held at least 56 illegal aliens hostage at a house in Phoenix. While held hostage at gunpoint, the victims were beaten with fists, kicked, pistol whipped, and threatened with death. Defendant Medina-Nevarez burned the face of one victim with a cigarette. Other victims had plastic bags put over their heads and were beaten until they could not breath. Three of these victims gave emotional and tear-filled testimony at trial.

“Human smugglers are notoriously ruthless, but this criminal organization is among the most violent and callous we have ever encountered,” said Alonzo Peña, Special Agent in Charge of the ICE Office of Investigations in Arizona. “This sentence sends a strong message to those who brutalize others in the commission of these kind of crimes that they will be dealt with severely. ICE will continue to work with its law enforcement partners to attack and dismantle organizations like this that put our communities at risk.”

When sentencing the defendant, the judge found that the defendant demonstrated a leadership role. Judge Strand also found that ransoms were demanded for the victims’ release, that the victims suffered serious bodily injury and that the victims were vulnerable due to their illegal status in the United States. Judge Strand, when imposing the maximum term of life for the two hostage taking counts, described Medina-Nevarez’s behavior as “mean-spirited and brutal to an unusual high degree.” Medina-Nevarez received concurrent ten year terms for the two Harboring charges and received a seven year consecutive term for the Use of a Firearm during the hostage taking. Medina-Nevarez is currently serving a ten and one half year sentence for a drive by shooting and aggravated assault convictions in Maricopa County Superior Court, CR2003-018302-001-DT.

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Last week, U.S. District Judge Stephen M. McNamee sentenced Fabian Franco-Saenz, 21, of Mazatlan, Sinaloa, Mexico, to 280 months less an adjustment of 48 months for time already served for his role in the same hostage taking in January 2003. Franco-Saenz had pleaded guilty to Conspiracy to Take Hostages and Conspiracy to Harbor Illegal Aliens. He is currently serving a 14 year sentence in state prison for raping one of the hostages.

The three remaining defendants in this case, including Ruben Franco-Plaza, who was convicted at trial with Medina-Nevarez, are set for sentencing on March 6, 2007, before the Honorable Judge Strand.

The investigation leading to the guilty verdict and sentence was conducted by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Pinal County Sheriff's Office, Phoenix Police Department and the Peoria Police Department.

The prosecution was handled by Lisa Jennis Settel, Assistant U.S. Attorney, District of Arizona, Phoenix.

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